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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 001700

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [KISL](#) [IR](#) [AJ](#)
SUBJECT: AZERBAIJANI "ANTI-ISLAM" ARTICLE PROVOKES REACTION
IN BOTH IRAN AND AZERBAIJAN

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Classified By: Ambassador Anne Derse for reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: On November 9, a little known Azerbaijani newspaper, Sanat, published an article described as "anti-Islamic" in conservative religious quarters. The article provoked a shrill if short-lived reaction in both Azerbaijan and Iran. In Nardaran, a village near Baku known for its religious conservatism, protesters demonstrated for three days and called for the author, Rafiq Tagi's death. In Baku, Caucasus Muslim Board chairman Sheikh Pashazade criticized the article but stopped short of calling for any action against Tagi. On November 17, the GOAJ arrested Tagi and Sanat's editor Samir Sadagatoglu on charges of inciting religious hatred. Opposition politicians and journalists condemned the arrest as an infringement on free speech and media freedom. In Iran, clerics condemned the article as anti-Islamic and called for protests against Azerbaijani diplomatic missions in Tabriz and Tehran. While the press (picking up on an erroneous blog posting) reported that 10,000 Iranians protested in Tabriz, embassy contacts report that the November 10 and 17 protests attracted less than two dozen protesters, mostly Basij and clerics. Although the Iranian media continues the anti-Azerbaijani drumbeat, Iranian and Azerbaijani official reactions have been low-key.
End summary.

AZERBAIJANI REACTION RUNS THE GAMUT

¶2. (U) On November 9, a little known Azerbaijani newspaper, Sanat, published an article described as anti-Islamic in religious circles. The article, an unfavorable if largely academic comparison of European Judeo-Christian values and Muslim values, provoked a short-lived, albeit shrill reaction in both religious and secular quarters of Azerbaijani society. Twenty-five kilometers north of Baku in the village of Nardaran, protesters held back-to-back demonstrations on November 16 and 17, condemning the article and its author. A village leader in Nardaran, a community known for its Shiite conservatism and pro-Iranian stance, publicly called for author Rafiq Tagi's death for insulting the Prophet Mohammed, while other Nardaranis called for his life imprisonment. At the same time, the small pro-Iranian Islamic Party of Azerbaijan urged all Muslims to protest against the article and its authors.

¶3. (C) Religious reaction was much more muted in Baku circles. Caucasus Muslim Board Chairman Sheikh Ul-Islam

Pashazade criticized the article as an affront to Islam in public remarks but said the matter belonged to the courts. Chairman of the State Committee on Work with Religious Associations Hidayet Orujov privately told Poloff that the story was a minor issue that would blow over and that efforts to divide Azerbaijanis along religious lines would always fail in light of the country's tradition of interfaith harmony and tolerance. Former Juma Mosque Imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu told Poloff that he would not make any public comment on the article since he believed it was a red herring aimed to distract public attention from pressing democracy and human rights problems. Ibrahimoglu added that the Nardaran protest was an overreaction to a deliberate provocation and that the society should simply let the courts deal with it. GOAJ Prosecutor General Zakir Garalov opened an investigation into whether the article violated the law against inciting religious hatred, and on November 17 arrested Tagi and Sanat's editor Samir Sadagatoglu and placed them in pretrial detention.

14. (U) The GOAJ decision to prosecute the journalists engendered a swift reaction from wider society. Sabir Rustamkanli, an MP, harshly criticized the PGO's decision to arrest the journalists as a "barbaric and feudal" punishment for someone exercising his right to free speech. Rustamkhanli said he believed this issue was best solved through public condemnation and not through GOAJ intervention. Other civil society activists commented that the arrests violated Azerbaijan's Council of Europe human rights and free speech obligations. On November 20, a small group of youth activists started a "campaign renouncing Islam." NGO activist Emin Huseynov, who heads the committee defending Azadliq newspaper and media freedom, adopted the author's cause telling reporters that it was wrong of the GOAJ to punish the exercise of free speech. Some human rights activists said that they believed the GOAJ or its surrogates published the article in an effort to distract

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attention from Azerbaijan's media freedom problems. On the international front, the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists issued a statement condemning the arrest of the two Sanat journalists, describing it as a violation of free speech.

IN IRAN, CLERICS DENOUNCE STORY, SMALL PROTESTS MOUNTED

15. (U) Interpreting the article as an insult to the Prophet and Islam, religious prayer leaders in Tabriz, Orumiyeh, and Tehran called for protest action on November 10 and 17. Featuring a wide range of demands, protests have demanded everything from the proclamation of a death sentence for the publication's author to the overthrow of the Azerbaijani republic. Not surprisingly, the IRI has also attributed publication of the Sanat article to "Zionist and American machinations."

16. (U) While the press (using information from an erroneous blog posting) reported that demonstrations in Tabriz drew 10,000 protesters, embassy contacts report that the protests have been nonviolent, relatively small in size (groups of protesters numbering in the teens), and have not been representative of a wider cross section of Iranian society. The protesters reportedly have come primarily from two groups - Basij university students and religious scholars and clerics. Interestingly, a significant number of Iranian student organizations and blogs, to include the "Liberation Movement of Northern Iran" or Iran-e Shomali, have taken up this issue. In addition to repeating calls for the death of Sanat journalist Rafiq Tagi, these blogs have provided inaccurate, inflated accounts of the protest actions, with the blog affiliated with Iran-e Shomali claiming that over 10,000 protesters took part in the Tabriz protests alone.

¶7. (U) On November 19, during Sahar Television's (an Iranian satellite station targeting Azerbaijan and broadcast in the Azeri language) daily broadcast of its "Compass" program, the program's anchor called upon Azerbaijanis to overthrow their government. Commenting on the program, Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry spokesman Tahir Tagizadeh characterized the IRI's reaction to the "provocative" article as "sharp." Other media reports speculate that the GOAJ is disturbed by what it now interprets as a deliberate effort on the part of the IRI to "harm Azerbaijan's sovereignty."

¶8. (C) Comment: Iran's outspoken ambassador in Baku, Afshar Suleymani, has been conspicuously absent from this controversy. A prominent figure in the Azerbaijani media during the Lebanon conflict and May 2006 ethnic Azeri protests, Suleymani is rumored to have suffered a heart attack and to be recuperating in Iran. During his absence, Iran's Baku embassy has played virtually no role in this most recent controversy, its only official statement having come on November 23. Commenting on an Iranian cleric's fatwa calling for the death of Tagi, a spokesman for the Iranian embassy stated that "this was not the government position." Also noteworthy in this most recent row between the two countries has been Iran's extensive use of blog sites in attempt to fan the controversy. A prominent feature in other IRI disinformation efforts, this is the first time that such tactics have been employed in an Iranian-Azerbaijani controversy.

DERSE